

Scripture:  
Mark 7:1-23

“First things first.”

As our first verse indicates some Pharisees and teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus.

And as they do they notice that some of His disciples begin eating without first ceremonially washing their hands --- thereby failing to uphold the tradition of the elders.

And without missing a beat they turn to Jesus and ask Him ---- in verse 5 --- “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?”

To which Jesus replies --- quoting from the prophet Isaiah in verse 6 saying -  
--- “These people honor me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me.  
They worship me in vain;  
their teachings are merely human rules.”

Everything we need to know about what went wrong for the Pharisees and teachers --- is right here in these verses.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees have got their priorities all mixed up.

The turn to the traditions of the elders ---- human traditions --- instead of God’s will.

It’s as if Jesus says --- “First things first ---- make sure your heart is oriented to God.”

Picking it up at verse 20 Jesus says --- “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within --- out of a person’s heart --- that evil thoughts come. ----- All evils come from inside and defile a person.”

Part of what this means is that intentions matter.

“What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within --- out of a person’s heart --- that evil thoughts come. ----- All evils come from inside and defile a person.”

Why we do what we do matters --- and sometimes it matters even more than what we actually do.

Think of it this way --- a scenario.

“Why are you spending all that time trimming up that bush on the edge of your property there Jim --- I thought you didn’t like yard work?”

“Well in truth ----- I don’t like yard work --- in fact I detest it ---- the only reason I’m doing this is because my neighbour loves to do it ---- and he has really irritate me lately so I’m doing it to take the pleasure away from him.”

That’s a nasty neighbour ---- doing something just to remove pleasure from another ---- intentions matter.

Jim goes from looking like a pretty good guy --- cutting the hedge ----- to looking like a malicious fool.

In the end the same thing happened ----- Jim trimmed his neighbour’s bushes ----- but his intentions affect how we feel about what he did --- his intentions affect the deed itself.

The Pharisees ritually wash their hands not to be clean and pleasing before God but to check off the box that says ---- makes sure you obey the traditions of the elders.

Maybe the disciples prayed and gave sincere thanks before eating --- ensuring their hearts were good with God --- wouldn’t that be more important than an empty ritual? ----- Jesus seems to be saying it would be.

The person that accidentally bumps into someone in line causing them to spill a drink --- who immediately says -- “I’m sorry I didn’t see you there --- did I spill your coffee ---- please let me buy you another.”

Is quite different from the person who does the very same thing but doesn't care at all how his actions affect others ---- and simply bullies his way around.

Intentions matter --- outcomes can be secondary.

First things first --- disposition of the heart.

If the hearts of the disciples are oriented to God and they forget to ceremonially wash their hands ----- does it really matter?

If the disciples remember to wash their hands but their hearts are in no way oriented to God --- what matters most?

That's part of what Jesus is pointing out ---- focus on what truly matters.

To go to someone and say in order to be a good Christian you have to do this --- and this --- and this --- and don't do that and that and that --- is to get it all backwards.

Christianity is first and foremost about an experience of the saving one --- and then an appreciation of some of the changes this experience draws out of us.

God didn't come to the Israelites with the 10 commandments first ----- and then reveal Himself to them.

He first came to them in the desert in Egypt --- and revealed Himself to them freeing them from Pharaoh ---- before providing any kind of lasting guidance.

The law ----- the commandments --- were given as a guide for those who already knew God --- and who were already in love with Him on account of their profound saving loving experience of Him freeing them from bondage to slavery in Egypt.

The commandments were not an imposition pressed upon the people from outside.

They were a blessing given from God to the people.

Remember the people petitioned Moses ----

“Please please Moses go to God and tell Him we need help --- we can’t get along ---- we can’t live together --- we’re stealing from each other --- we’re jealous ---- and envious --- we can’t seem to live in community together --- so please Moses go the mountain and plead to Him to help us out and give us some direction.”

So Moses goes and returns with some answers.

God said to Moses ---- “Tell the people to follow these 10 things and their problems will be resolved --- follow these things and they will soon see that they are able to live together in community and in harmony.”

The people already had a profound experience with the divine one and were ready for further direction.

Unfortunately sometimes like the Pharisees in Mark’s gospel today ---- we too can get it wrong ----- becoming focused on the rules ---- without first remembering why we are doing something in the first place.

We don’t introduce someone to the faith by presenting them with a list of rules they must follow in order to be part of the family of God.

First things first ----- a fundamental orientation and reverence for God is necessary.

God first revealed Himself to the Israelites in Egypt then and only then did He provide them with some divine direction.

Jesus first revealed Himself to His disciples then and only then He provided them with some divine direction.

It is always Gods’ initiative that first opens up hearts to Him --- and not human effort or human tradition --- rules.

Jesus faulted the Pharisees and teachers of the law not for doing something right --- first showing reverence and thanks to God.

Jesus corrected the Pharisees and teachers of the law precisely because they had lost perspective.

Following a law doesn't lead one to God ----- once God is known following a law can help to keep one stay close to Him --- but it isn't what draws one to Him in the first place --- and Jesus clearly wanted to remind them of this.

After observing the Nazis in action for a while ---- the German philosopher Heinrich Heine once said that ----- “Wherever they burn books, they will sooner or later burn people.”

And as Scott Hoezee rightly says ---- we can draw from this gruesome observation by observing that ----- “Wherever people make serving God all about keeping rules ---- sooner or later all of life becomes all about drawing lines to determine who's in and who's out.”

Which of course is a huge mistake --- there really isn't any who's in or who's out kind of focus if we've truly experienced God.

When people become more interested in telling people about the rules and how they'll burn in hell than in proclaiming to them a gracious God who has already given everything to keep just that from happening ----- it's a misguided disaster.

First things first.

God knows all there is to know about each and every one of us.

God knows what we really truly want in life.

As mixed up as we can sometimes be ---- God knows the very deepest desires of our hearts ---- and He loves us ---- and nothing can ever change that.

Even when we do really stupid things God still loves us.

At the end of the day God's love for the misguided Pharisees and teachers was just as real as His love for the disciples ---- this can sometimes be hard to accept but it's true.

It's all too easy in life to get all caught up in all the wrong things --- such that our priorities become skewed.

Getting caught up in meeting the expectations of others instead of focusing on God ----- asking things like does God still love me more ----- or am I better than so and so ----- and other such misguided ---- messed up concerns.

The great thing is ---- even though we will mess things up --- God still and forever --- and always ---- loves us.

First things first.

God loves us.

God knows all there is to know about us and He loves us.

Start there in life.

And move out after having come to realize and accept this profound gospel truth.

All rules ----- commandments ----- counsel ---- and guidance ----- are only ever helpful after having first come to the realization and acceptance that God knows all there is to know about us and He loves us.

That's the crux of what Jesus is trying to instill in these misguided teachers and leaders.

Rules ---- commandments --- human traditions second.

First a heart oriented to God and His loving saving grace.

It's not 10 commandments first then freedom from slavery.

It's not ----- earn freedom by first following the commandments.

It's freedom first --- salvation first --- then some divine counsel.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law had got it all mixed up --- so Jesus boldly teaches them otherwise.

We must first have some kind of fundamental grasp of the gospel mystery --- -- an experience of the beautiful and mysteriously powerful saving nature of the gospel before we can ever grow into living out some of the demands and responsibilities and joys of it.

And as Jesus points out ----- if we don't get things right ---- we can actually cause more harm and help.

As Jesus says you can actually nullify the word of God.

Verse 13 today --- "Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down."

Jim ---- trimming the hedge just to take away the pleasure from someone else nullifies the perceived beauty of his act.

Doing things for all the wrong reasons can nullify the very act itself.

Jesus said ---- "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter into the kingdom of heaven..." ----- in Matthew 7 verse 21.

The motivation --- the intentions --- the disposition of the heart --- the authenticity of the act and word ----- matters ----- matters huge.

So much so that the disposition and intention can actually nullify the act itself.

In other words ----- "Why we do what we do ---- can actually matter more than what we actually do."

In other words ----- "First things first ---- intentions --- disposition of the heart."

If we do things for God without joy in our hearts --- or if we do things thinking we can earn God's love --- if we do things for all the wrong reasons we do a great disservice to our spiritual life.

If we have a child baptized just to --- "Get it done!" ----- without first any kind of appreciation for God's free and saving grace.

If we come to the table of the Lord --- flippantly and without any kind of appreciation for the powerful saving grace that is shared at the table ----- we are misguided to say the least.

The disciples could wash their hands all they want --- ceremonially and literally until their hands were chapped and red and worn down with all the scrubbing ---- but they wouldn't ever be clean before God if their heart wasn't in it.

We can baptize a child ----- celebrate Communion --- sing songs of praise and pray our hearts out --- but if our hearts aren't in it ---- woe to us.

We don't do something --- wash our hands or a baby before God ceremonially ---- take bread and wine in His name ----- just because ----- without first reflecting on the meaning and purpose and disposition of our hearts.

First things first --- otherwise as Jesus said today --- "You nullify the word of God by your tradition..."

Disposition --- intentions ----- state of our hearts ----- matter.

The gospel is serious business.

God's love for us ----- is serious business.

The gospel is saving business ----- God's love for us is saving business.

It's awesome ----- and mysterious and beautiful and powerful.

And it's for all of us.

And it begins with God working in our hearts.

It begins with the realization that God loves us and saves us and frees us.

Our faith calls us to look deep into the truth of the gospel and ---- the truth and love and saving Grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ and do likewise.



We can find fault --- poke holes --- ban and burn books --- or we can get on with the real business of building up the kingdom of heaven ---- establishing God's justice ---- and building disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jesus has little time for the Pharisees and teachers negativity and complaints ----- yes He takes a minute to address them here but if we look at the context for this passage He quickly moves on to heal and honour those whose hearts are oriented to God.

Sometimes when faced with negativity --- we have to quickly move on past it and focus our attention on the positive --- move to those whose hearts are focused on God.

Jesus didn't get all bogged down with details of human traditions and practices --- first things first --- He focused on keeping His heart oriented to God.

We are called to do this exact thing ----- when faced with people like the Pharisees --- pointing out what went wrong ----- negativity ---- Jesus told them to let go of the stupid little details and focus on what really mattered.

Disposition of the heart.

When someone's heart is truly oriented towards the good ---- towards the truth of Christ ---- you can tell ----- it is obvious.

That's what God wants of us --- to be oriented to the truth of Jesus Christ --- and not be like some kind of judge at the Olympics only ever looking to point out a fault and deduct a point.

We all know those kind of people right --- those that all they ever truly do well is point out faults in others.

Today the Pharisees were just like that --- and Jesus rebukes them.

We are called to keep our hearts --- minds ---- spirit and strength --- oriented to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!” ---- Jesus said in verse 9 today.

First things first --- “God loves you --- orient your heart in such a way that it is obvious that you know and accept this.”

Christianity is first and foremost about an experience of the divine saving one.

The love of the divine saving one.

God loves us each and every one of us profoundly.

And unless we keep our hearts oriented to Him ----- all we will ever do is find fault in others and live for all the wrong reasons.

Amen.